

Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER VIII

Heinrich Rothe

Medina County

LATE in the fall of 1854 the Heinrich Rothe family from Germany landed at Galveston, after a 66-day voyage on a little two-masted vessel—the 150-ton "Salucia." The family consisted of Heinrich Rothe, his wife, Emilia Wurzbach Rothe, their four sons, Fritz, Heinrich, Louis and August, ages 15, 14, 11 and 8 respectively, and a daughter, Ernestine, age four.

The reason for their emigration to Texas was probably due to a combination of forces. There was a political upheaval in German. About one-fifth of the white population in Texas at that time was German. Among these was the Wurzbach family—relatives of Mrs. Rothe—who lived on the Medina River about six miles north of Castroville, part of the Castroville Colony. These and other relatives had written glowing accounts of the opportunities in Texas. Both Mr. and Mrs. Rothe had an unconquerable desire to give their children the best opportunities for social improvement. This was probably the determining factor that caused them to



MRS. ERNESTINE ROTHE RICHTER
(Picture taken in 1917)

leave their home at Warmen Steinbach in Oberfranken, Bavaria, about one hundred miles from what is said to be the ancestral seat, Rothenburg, in the same kingdom.

Herr Rothe had been of the bourgeoisie, a man of some means. He held a civic office, and performed certain duties connected with determining land values based upon the richness of the soil. They were accustomed to comfortable living and the conveniences in Germany of the time.

The family spent five days in Galveston, then proceeded by boat down the Gulf to Indianola, or "Karl's Haven," where an uncle from near Castroville met them. Eight days were spent there in preparation for the long wintry journey in ox-drawn wagons to their new home. They arrived in San Antonio on the eleventh day where they enjoyed a good meal at the home of Uncle Justus Wurzbach. Two days later they arrived at the home of the astonished aunt (whose husband had met them) who had not expected them to complete the trip in so short a time.

That was a memorable journey to every member of the family, not because it was made in a new land, but because just fourteen days after their arrival, on Sunday morning, December 17, 1854, the mother quietly breathed her last. She had been sick on the way over. The long voyage, bad drinking water, of which she had drunk very little; the cutting loose from all ties of relationship, friends, home and country; braving the perils of ocean travel in a small rough vessel; landing on a foreign soil among people whose language she could neither speak nor understand; the long tedious trip overland in slow moving ox-drawn wagons, had probably weakened her condition to the extent that she could not combat with what is now believed to have been an attack of typhoid fever, although she was attended by the best physicians available in both San Antonio and Castroville. After a service conducted by the Evangelical minister from Castroville, they laid her to rest in the garden behind the Wurzbach home, near the Medina River, in a quiet spot under the great shadow of the cypress and pecan trees. The exact place is now unknown.

By MYRTLE MURRAY

District Agent, Extension Service
College Station, Texas

So the first letter Fritz wrote back to Germany carried the tragic news—that mother had come to Texas but to die. He spoke of the desolation caused by her death, of how he and his little brothers and sister needed her, and how they had lost all desire to go on with their plans.

After a few months with relatives, they moved about six miles farther up the Medina River where they fenced about 50 acres of land for farming.

The father, about 60 years of age, alone with his motherless children, went through many bitter experiences. While he was accustomed to determining land values based upon the richness of the soil, he had no preparation for farming under pioneer conditions; Mr. Rothe had been an office man. He had to learn to cook. He baked corn bread and nice white bread in an old-fashioned Dutch oven, placing the skillet over the coals of an out-door fire and heaping coals up on the lid of the skillet. The neighbors gave them milk. Ernestine worked with him, and at an early age

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took over the major part of the cooking. Her aunt was much help in teaching her. And, by the time she was twelve years old she assumed full responsibility of the home. The brothers said she always had something good to eat. "A good cook is one who can cook a good meal out of nothing," they would laughingly remark. And, indeed, she seemed to do just that. For when she did not have anything else to cook, she would make a delicious brown soup out of toasted flour.

"One of us will have to kill a rabbit or a deer, or go fishing," one of the boys would remark when she served brown flour soup.

There was plenty of fish in the Medina River, and abundance of wild game. The following story was related many times by Mr. Rothe, and is taken from Sowell's history of Indian Fighters:

"Jack Davenport was out hunting one day, he said, near the Sabinal River, and killed a deer. There was a large mesquite tree, and to this he dragged the deer and proceeded to skin it. Two more deer came up and snorted at him. Mr. Davenport reloaded and fired until both of them were dead. He then brought them to the same tree. While stooping over at work he suddenly felt something clutch at his shirt collar behind. Turning quickly, he saw a large panther reared up behind him. His gun was not loaded, and he backed off; loading as he went, the panther following. He killed this one, and happening to glance up the tree, he saw another which

he also killed. Three deer and two panthers, you might say, killed in a pile."

The two older boys, Fritz and Heinrich, had good educations for their age. Fritz had received some training in architecture, and had finished a course in surveying before moving from Germany. He planned a house, and with the help of August, age 9, built one room with a loft for the boys to sleep in. Their great accomplishment at that time was the building of a fireplace for cooking and for warmth. First, he built a square mold in which to mold brick. Then, August mixed blue clay and prairie hay, pressed it into the mold and dried them for Fritz to use in building the fireplace. Sacks filled with prairie hay served as beds for the boys, but Fritz constructed a bedstead of logs for his father.

Lived Frontier Life

Ernestine stayed with an aunt in San Antonio where she attended school three years. The three younger boys had attended school some before moving from Germany but they had very little opportunity of attending school here. They grew up as early Texas pioneer boys. They loved the free open life. And, they did not feel the lack of cultural and educational companionship, because they had never had it.

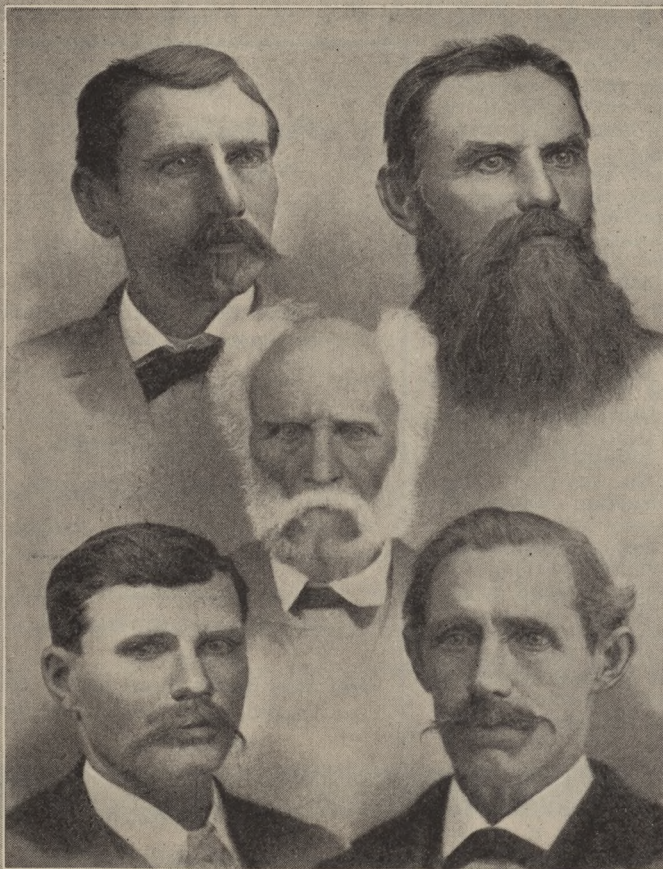
Fritz had been a student in Frankfurt-on-Main. Some of his relatives have letters written by him in French while he was a student there. Old copies

of his letters to relatives in Germany reveal that he was charmed by the beauty of the Medina country. He spoke of the beautiful hills, that reminded him of home—Germany—by the Medina River "a rapid-flowing, crystal-clear stream, wider than the Main at Baireuth." He told about crop failures, but said they had a good corn and pecan crop, though the price of corn was low. He said the brothers had learned to break oxen while doing work for other people, and were allowed the use of the teams for six months during the year. They were able to make some money by hauling freight from the coast. But, now they needed a new wagon, for the one they brought with them from Germany was not so good any more. A wagon cost about \$140.

But that he missed the association with cultured people is shown by an excerpt from a letter, written in German, to a relative, and translated by Miss Josie Rothe, of D'Hanis.

"If one wishes to prosper here as a farmer, one must work hard . . . and when I read in your letters about your brothers and what they have made of themselves, a sort of homesickness takes hold of me, and I think I might have been something better than a farmer. Yet, I am satisfied with my lot . . . What one misses most is the association with cultured people . . . for one can converse only about cows and oxen."

The great cattle industry was to start in the near future, and the Rothe family was to be counted among the great



Left—Heinrich Rothe (center) and his four sons. Top row—Henry and Lewis Rothe. Bottom row—August and Fritz Rothe. Upper right—West side of the ruins of the F. Rothe home built when he married in 1872. It was located a few yards east of the original home of the Rothe family when they established their ranch on the Seco. The original



home consisted of two rooms and two porches. There is no trace of the building left now. The north wall was of rock with a big fireplace. All other walls were of plastered pickets and had cypress floors.

Lower right—Southeast corner of the Henry Rothe home. This picture was taken in 1937. Part of the old stairway still clings to the north wall.

cattlemen of early Texas. They had learned quickly how to manage stock.

In 1862 they moved to the Seco, near Fort Lincoln. Here they entered a three-year contract to care for the Riley's stock. In the meantime, Fritz and Henry entered the Confederate Army and served until its close, leaving the two younger brothers, Louis, 21, and August, 18, to carry out the contract of caring for the Riley cattle.

This was a big undertaking even for much older men. But the Rothe contract seemed to have always been a family contract. So naturally, they felt that this was their responsibility. They were seasoned pioneers by now; their knowledge of handling cattle was an important asset; and they knew the country. Horses were secured by breaking the wild mustangs that roamed about in great numbers. Both of them liked to break wild horses for saddle use. The big problem was not in catching them, but in keeping them. For about once each month, usually during the light of the moon, there would be an Indian raid during which the horses would be stolen in large numbers. It is estimated that three thousand dollars worth of horses were stolen from the Rothe brothers by the Indians during the three years they handled the Riley cattle.

Sad Indian Experience

There were some personal encounters with the Indians, some of which are related to Sowell's history of the Indian Fighters. In the spring of 1865, August Rothe, George Miller, Hubert Weynand, and Jacob Sauter left the settlement to hunt oxen on the Hondo at a place called "Sink of the Water." These places are an accumulation of heaps of gravel and rock that for ages have been piling up, and through which the water sinks. Sometimes the water will break out again many miles below. The boys were all young. Hubert Weynand, about 12 years of age, was the youngest. The others were older. They made their camp at the sinks, and then began hunting for their oxen. Jacob Sauter found his the first day, and returned home.

That same day, August Rothe found an old man, Ludwig Mummie, who had been lost two days while trying to go from Bandera to D'Hanis. He was very hungry and delirious. August took him to camp and gave him coffee and food, after which he mounted his horse and rode on. The boys begged him to stay. He had a good gun, pistol, and plenty of cartridges. After Mummie left, August went to see about the horses, but hearing firing in the camp he hastened back, and found that George Miller had nearly emptied August's pistol firing at a tree. "George, you should not have done that," said August. "I have no more loads, and now suppose the Indians should come upon us." Weynand spoke up and said he had a little powder and two buckshots in his pocket. There was one load left in the pistol. August took the two buck shots, and by patching them like a loading rifle, charged two more chambers of the pistol, making three in all.

During the night the hobbled horses strayed from camp. When they were caught two hours later, August tied his and Miller's horse together to lead them back. Hubert Weynand had his bridle with him, so he mounted his horse. The camp was located on the bluff bank of the Hondo. In the rear was a small rocky hill. They met George Miller at

the edge of the rocky hill, coming in a run. He told them that the Indians were under a high bluff about four hundred yards up the river, watering their horses. While he was talking, they heard the rattle of rocks and knew the Indians were coming out of the bed of the creek to chase George Miller. The Indians were upon them before they could untie and mount the horses. Hubert Weynand was already mounted.

"Run to McCay's ranch as fast as you can," said August Rothe to Hubert

Weynand. He set off at full speed, pursued by three of the Indians. August and George Miller ran on foot to the mountain pursued by the other five Indians. The Indians came close, yelling. Rothe drew his pistol and waved it as he ran. When near the base of the mountain, Miller gave out and said he could go no further. "Run, Run!" commanded Rothe, as he pointed his pistol at the Indians. The Indians were afraid of Rothe's pistol, and would dodge behind trees as he aimed it at them, which

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gave them a chance to gain a little headway. The Indians saw that Miller was not armed, and one of them jerked hold of him as Rothe looked back. The boy jerked loose again and ran toward the mountain, but an Indian struck him over the head with a lance. George staggered from side to side, but continued to run. An Indian ran ahead of him and aimed at his breast with a lance, and Miller stopped. August thought Hubert had made his escape, but at this time he heard him scream, and looking in his direction saw an Indian pulling him by the hair, out of some bushes. He has never been heard of since then.

Threatened With Pistol

The Indians now flanked August Rothe, but they were on poor horses, except one who was riding a pony belonging to Cosgrove. They were afraid of his pistol. But one got close enough for August to hear him say, in fair English, that he was going "to have the white man's scalp." As the man on the Cosgrove pony drew near August, he aimed his pistol at the Indian. The fellow wheeled his horse quickly behind some live oaks, and at the same time sent an arrow which hit the muzzle of Rothe's pistol, glanced down and went through his pants leg, just grazing the skin. By waving his pistol and threatening to fire when the Indians got too close, August Rothe finally reached the top of the mountain, and the Indians gave up the chase. Later, upon examination it was found that one of the loose-fitting buck shot had dropped out during his flight. The only shot he had was the other buckshot that still remained in the chamber. August continued his flight down the other side of the mountain until he knew the Indians had given up the chase. He lay down to rest and nearly died of exhaustion. As soon as he was able, he went on to the McCay's ranch, and also to the Miller ranch to tell them the news. McCay and four men accompanied August to the camp where they found Miller's shoes, close together, like a man would place them in retiring for the night. Miller's body was found near the bluff where he had first seen the Indians. He was stripped except for one sock. His hands were tied behind him so tightly with hobbles that his flesh was cut to the bone. He was lanced in the left side, and his jugular vein was cut. He was not scalped, or in any other way mutilated, except the bruise on the head where he was hit with a lance at the time of his capture.

August said when he went to tell the Miller family about George's death he would rather have faced the Indians again.

With the two brothers at home in constant danger from attacks by the Indians, and the possibility of the other two brothers not returning from the army, Ernestine and her father were drawn very close together. Her courage and cheerfulness equaled that of the pioneer mothers of that time. And one can imagine her joy when the Civil War ended, and the brothers returned safely.

The contract for caring for the Riley cattle ended, the brothers became joint owners of about four hundred head of cattle for their three years' work. They now established themselves permanently in business, buying some land of their own, and building a home of rock on

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the banks of the Seco where the Louis Rothe home was afterward built.

After the partnership was formed, the father, Heinrich Rothe, went out into the woods and brought in four sticks about the size of one's finger. He called his four sons around him. He broke one of them easily enough. But when he put all four of them together he could not break them.

"Now, that is the way it will be with you in this business," said he. "One of you can break it." But, if the four of you stick together not anything can break it."

In the meantime the sister, Ernestine, had returned from school to live with them in the new rock house. It consisted of two rooms, the larger one about 14 x 16 feet. The west room had a large fireplace on the west side which was used for cooking and for warmth. The east room, the one she occupied, was smaller and had a plank floor. Later it was enlarged by the addition of two rooms to the east and a closed-in porch on the north for Louis when he married.

Fritz married on the same day, and

built near by. Father Rothe lived in the house with Fritz, while August and Ernestine remained in the older home. Henry was probably away at the time. But, when he married, he built his home about 50 feet west of the first home. It consisted of two stories with the stairs on the outside of the north wall. The family still recalls with much amusement that there was no door between the two rooms on the first floor. So the members of the family had to go through all kinds of weather in going from room to room. Later when August married he lived in the same house with Louis. In the meantime Ernestine had married Carl Richter, and was living on the Davenport Ranch.

Was Ideal Homemaker

Her sisters-in-law, Mrs. Fritz Rothe and Mrs. August Rothe, who are still living, say that Ernestine was an ideal housekeeper and homemaker. She usually milked three cows, and churned in a wooden churn. Fritz built a shelf to keep the milk on. She kept the milk covered with clean white wet cloths to keep it cool. She was an excellent cook. Being the only daughter, she was naturally the victim for much teasing and joking from her brothers and boy cousins in her aunt's home. But she was jolly, and could hold her own with them. Yet, they were kind and considerate. She had a pet goose, that was accidentally killed.

"Now, we shall have baked goose," laughed one of the boys. But when he looked at her tightly drawn lips and great solemn eyes, he did not say any more. Ernestine dug the grave and buried the goose herself.

She nearly always had as good a garden as there was in the country. There was nearly always an abundance of vegetables, milk, butter, eggs, and wild game for the table.

Ernestine learned to sew while quite young and made all of the clothes for herself, her father and her brothers. She usually made at least one suit for each member of the family during the year. The sewing was done by hand. The cloth was bought in San Antonio, and was usually buckskin and homespun. The buckskin was bought already tanned. She sewed it together by "back stitching" for the men's clothes. She did all the knitting for the entire family. But that was really pastime because she could talk while she did it.

She made bullets by moulding them out of lead.

Ernestine and her father spent much time at home together. They were great companions. One night while they were at home alone, the dogs kept barking. She peeped out through the crack of the house and saw an Indian crawling toward the barn. Both she and her father knew they were trying to steal the horses. The dogs made so much noise the Indians must have become frightened, because they did not steal any that night. The family had brought an old desk with them from Germany, and quite a number of books. She and her father spent many happy hours together while he read, and she knitted or crocheted. Later a cataract began to grow on Mr. Rothe's eye. The children took him to San Antonio for treatment, but he became so homesick that the physician permitted him to return home, provided he would not remove the bandages. Ernestine left him for a few

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minutes to get some lettuce from the garden. When she returned, he was sitting in the bright sun without his bandages. He was never able to see very much after that. Mr. Rothe continued to go around the place gathering kindling wood and raising his own tobacco.

Ernestine did the shopping for the family and for the community at the store at D'Hanis. When cattle were sold they received money in gold and silver. It was kept in the top dresser drawer. When someone went to Castroville or San Antonio, he took a sack of money, and returned with a wagon load of goods.

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The F. Rothe and Brothers ranch was established at an opportune time. Just after the war, there was a growing demand for beeves. The Texas cattle were started "up the trail," in great herds to markets at the Kansas railway terminals. The business of F. Rothe and Brothers expanded under the executive ability of the oldest, coupled with the work and cooperation of all four of them. They continued to use the brand recorded by their father in Medina county in 1856. Thousands of cattle bearing this famous brand were driven up the trail from D'Hanis, the trip lasting about six months.

The business continued to grow until in 1900 it was estimated that they owned 100,000 acres of land, much of which was in Medina and Bandera counties, 85,000 acres of which was fenced. At times they had as many as 16,000 head of cattle and many hundred head of horses.

They had also invested in sheep, the largest herd probably numbering between 4,000 and 5,000.

The business continued to operate as a partnership until 1896. On the front gallery of August's home, in the fall of that year, the brothers met and the ranch was divided by verbal agreement.

Mr. Rothe continued to live with his sons until his death in 1875. Although totally blind for many years before his death, he usually took a walk each day through the pasture adjoining his home. One evening he failed to return. After an all night search he was found not far away, but unable to get back.

Ernestine married Carl Richter, and was the first among the children to marry.

Fritz Rothe married Mary Reuter, and Louis married Agatha Ney on New Year's Eve, 1871. August married Emma Sauter, and Henry married Anna Reinhart.

The Rothe children are dead. Two of the daughters-in-law, Mrs. Fritz Rothe, and Mrs. August Rothe, are still living with their children near D'Hanis on the Seco. The grandchildren still living are among the new Americans who have faced the adversities of the past few years with a courage that equalled that of the Heinrich Rothe family of the pioneer period. And they are doing their part during the present economic and cultural transition.

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